

RIO DE JANEIRO

rock climbing in the land of carnival

BY JOSÉ GUILHERME DERRAIK

When the plane touched down at the international airport of Rio de Janeiro last August I was ecstatic. After three and a half years, I was finally in my hometown again. It was great to be back with my wife Nicola and Miguel, our son, who was just over two months old.

Rio de Janeiro is known worldwide as the land of carnival, friendly people, beautiful women, soccer and...violence. What most people ignore is that the *Cidade Maravilhosa*—Wonderful City—is the best place in the planet for urban rock climbing. It has an amazing geography: countless beaches, a lagoon, a huge bay, the world's biggest urban forest. It's a striking landscape, and visitors have no doubt that Rio is the most beautiful city in the world.

Sprouting up amongst all these features there are several rock outcrops, with over 1000 routes for all tastes, from easy climbs to some of the hardest routes in South America. There is also an enormous range of route lengths, from bouldering moves to 700m long routes that take two days to complete. The vast majority of them are bolted, as there are very few cracks around.

After all you've seen on television, you are probably asking yourself if it is safe to climb in Rio. Like any other big city in the world it has violence, which is aggravated by poverty and wealth living side-by-side, with shantytowns on hillsides amongst the best neighbourhoods.

The Author, José Derraik on the 3rd pitch of *Luiz Arnaud* (19). Morro da Babilônia, Urca, Rio de Janeiro. In the background is Corcovado.

A local climber learns quickly what to do and where to go. However that does not stop occasional mishaps from happening. For instance, two climbers on Agulhinha do Inhangá around Copacabana Beach were threatened by two fellows armed with machineguns working for local drug dealers, who told them to piss off as fast as they could (who wouldn't anyway?). Another unlucky chap was exploring possible walking tracks in the Floresta da Tijuca and was kidnapped by heavily armed men. He spent the day sitting down in the corner of a shack, convincing the drug dealers he was not a police informant. At the end of the day he managed to do that and the friendly chaps gave him some bread and water, and sent him away unharmed. A friend of mine was enjoying a beautiful route at Agulhinha da Gávea, until he started hearing strange high pitch noises. He and his partner performed some fast abseiling manoeuvres when they realised some asshole was using them as targets for shooting practice.

There are natural hazards too. One of my climbing partners had to stay immobile for quite some time while belaying in *Secundo Costa Neto* (23) on the North Face of Pão-de-Açúcar. Beside him laid a good-sized jararaca (*Bothrops jararaca*), a poisonous snake better left alone. Bees can also be a menace, and one guy leading on Irmão Maior do Leblon was abandoned on the climb after the belayers were attacked by a swarm of bees. I think he came down after many hours stuck up the rock. Not all stories have a happy ending though, as two climbers have been

killed by Africanized bees while bushwalking in Niterói, across the other side of Guanabara Bay. Another very common hazard are *marimbondos*, but I will tell you later about them. Hey! Don't let these stories put you off! They were unusual and isolated incidents and most frequented climbing crags are pretty much safe.

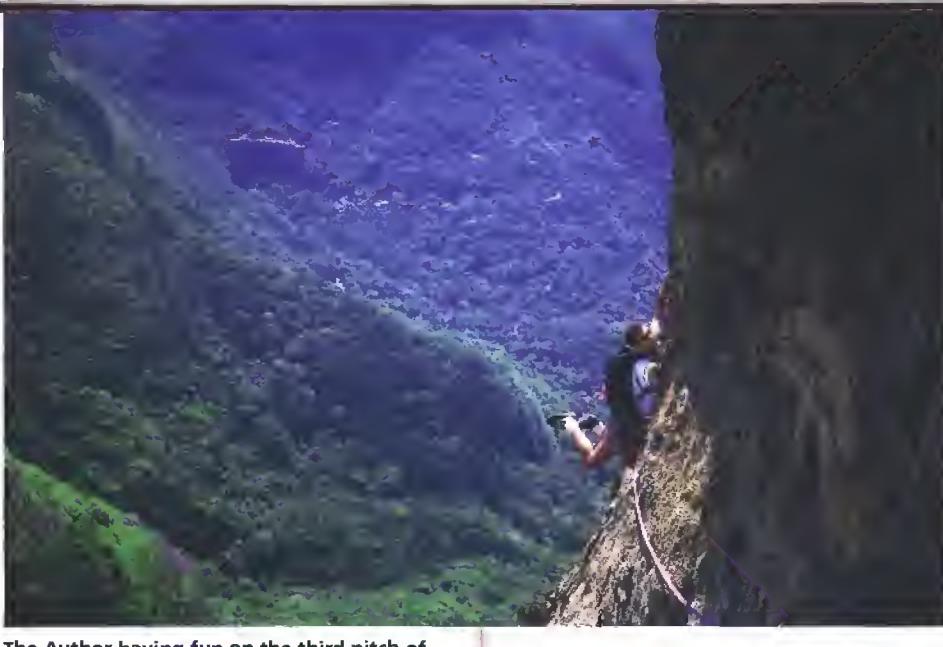
The most important climbing centre in Rio is the Urca district, at the entrance of Guanabara Bay. On an early Sunday morning it is just over five minutes drive from downtown. This rock climbing heaven has three major rock outcrops: Morro da Babilônia (238m), Morro da Urca (230m) and the almighty Pão-de-Açúcar (398m), the latter known internationally as Sugar Loaf. There are over 180 routes at the site suitable for all levels and styles of climbing.

Morro da Urca is great for beginners, with dozens of short routes from 50 to 100m long, well protected by bolts and graded from 11 to 18. Morro da Babilônia is one of the preferred crags, as its base is only two minutes walk from the road. It has 28 bolted routes from grades 12 to 21. The protection can be spaced in the easier sections, but the cruxes are well protected. It is the local learning crag for lead climbing. The routes require a lot of footwork, consisting mostly of friction climbing and edging on small footholds. This was therefore the ideal site for my first climb since my return. I chose *Luiz Arnaud* (19), a 5-pitch route with excellent protection. I went with my friend and climbing partner Luiz Alexandre Valadão. I lead it, though sometimes feeling uncomfortable for having to

rely so much on my 8-year-old Boreal Aces, often with my hands flat on the rock surface. Amazing how I lost my former confidence since I moved to New Zealand. Just being there gave me great pleasure though, and I could once more enjoy the beauty of my surroundings.

The third mountain is Pão-de-Açúcar, the best place on earth. My wife knows that after I die, I want my ashes scattered from its top. It has approximately 80 routes of all lengths and levels of difficulty, between 15 and 30 minutes walk from the car park. One kilometre along the walkway that goes around the mountain, there is a boulder approximately 15 metres high known as Pedra do Urubu, the best site in town for short athletic routes. Personally it's not my thing, but there are 20 routes





The Author having fun on the third pitch of Travessia dos Olhos (15 AO), Pedra da Gávea, Rio de Janeiro.

of grade 22 and above, including Southern Comfort (31/32) established by Wolfgang Güllich. Across to the other side of the beach, next to Morro da Babilônia, there is a small crag called *Ácidos*. It has only short and athletic overhanging routes, such as the roof *Nosferatu* (27). As the name suggests, the rock is full of crystals that work on your fingers like acid. After a couple of hours the skin on your fingertips is gone. But let's forget the boulders, as a multi-pitch route was what I sought.

The South Face of Pão-de-Açúcar has two main climbing areas: the *Totem* (a thick line of rock that sticks out the mountain from top to bottom) and the South Face itself. The latter has five extremely well frequented climbs, usually consisting of *agarrênciam* characterised by small holds and friction moves of various levels from 14 to 25. The hardest route there is *Alfredo Maciel* the crux of which includes a steep, intense 15 metre sequence with powerful moves on small holds, graded at 25. The sequence is difficult and it is very rare to actually see someone leading the crux.

The *Totem* is known for having most of the hard routes in the area. It has classic routes such as the 8-pitch *Lagartão* (23 A1/25) conquered in 1972. This is one of my favourite routes—I fell in love with it the first time I set my eyes on it. The day I lead it was like having a little taste of heaven: pure bliss. The *Totem* area has numerous routes that are long and slightly overhanging, requiring good endurance. Most routes are bolted, but in some sections it is necessary to use natural pro. It is worth mentioning also the 7 pitch *Via do Totem* (27) one of the hardest routes in the area, with good overhanging sequences in every pitch.

On each side of the *Totem* there is a long chimney climb: *Chaminé Stop* (15) and *Chaminé Gallotti* (21), respectively 220m and 250m long. You can actually swap from chimney to chimney through a passage halfway up. The *Chaminé Gallotti* was established in 1954, and it was the site for quite a disturbing incident for its conquerors. After about three pitches, the leader

had the fright of his life as he bumped into the mummified body of a chap jammed in the rock by his head! Needless to say they abseiled down as fast as a bullet. The fire service brought the body down and still no one knows how he got there. It's believed he tried to kill himself jumping from the top and ended up in the chimney.

Chaminé Stop is a classic, and was my next climbing target. Most of the time you are tucked deep inside it, and you can still climb even when it is pouring outside. Like every chimney in Rio it is poorly protected with the odd bolt here and there. The locals defend the idea you can't fall in chimneys. I always imagined myself falling down like a pinball to the ground, so I'd rather get a brave chap like Luiz Alexandre to go first.

Before climbing *Stop*, we warmed up on an adjacent 20 metre route *Stopida* (23), a well-protected overhanging route. Back to the chimney, I nervously lead the first pitch, a slab climb. Not due to the bolts ten metres apart, but

In the background is the awesome Pão-de-Açúcar, rockclimber's paradise, showing the West and South faces.

Hard to believe that it is just 5 minutes drive from downtown Rio de Janeiro. The climber is José Derraik on the 4th pitch of Luiz Arnaud (19), on Morro da Babilônia.

because my eyes were darting to the dozens of empty *marimbondo* nests around me. It was winter and they were probably empty, but it didn't give me any comfort. *Marimbondos* are big black wasps the size of your thumb with a sting that feels like a knife stab. Last time Luiz and I went there, they were all around us and a sudden unexpected move would have sent a bunch of them onto us. I couldn't tell how Luiz felt about leading the sequence under those circumstances. The guy is a legend and when he is climbing, he is so focussed that it's impossible to tell if he is completely freaked out or entirely relaxed. I was scared stiff with cold sweat coming down my face. I refused to look to the nests beside me and just looked ahead into the rock, but I could hear that terrible buzzing around me. Once the first pitch was over, the wasps were gone and I could relax again. Now you might ask me: *if you knew the wasps were there, why the hell didn't you choose another route?* I don't know, maybe because I knew they were just at the start. Or maybe I am just insane... or stupid.

This time the *marimbondos* were away and we went ahead without major problems. Luiz lead it while I belayed hoping that he wouldn't fall (a rescue there would be hell). Halfway up the route we found another kind of animal hazard: *urubus*—big vultures common all over Brazil. There was a nest tucked inside the chimney and after an hour of hesitation and noisy threats from the bird, we managed to pass.

After a snack in the *Salão Azul* (a huge base in the middle of the mountain where you could fit a bus), we entered a sequence that was more like caving, scrambling up rocks in very tight spaces tucked deep in the rock. Luiz was leading, and for the first time I heard him say he was scared. I followed him to find out why, just to discover another *urubu*. The bird was pretty close, a few metres away, making threatening noises and raising his feathers like a scared cat. It was a tricky situation. If the *urubu* attacked us in that tight space with nowhere to go to, we would





▲ Photo: Bruno Faria
1. Duda Thompson finding out that it's not as easy as it seems on Ácido Arquidônico (22) Morro dos Ácidos, Urca, Rio de Janeiro.
2. João Pedro, who has never had proper climbing shoes, leading the 3rd pitch of Lagartão (23 A1/25) in his old-fashioned sneakers, Pão-de-Açúcar, Urca.
3. José Derraik on Sexto Sentido (22/23), Fratelirras (Alt.-2550m), Parque Nacional da Itatiaia.
4. Prateleiras, Parque Nacional da Itatiaia.

have been in deep shit. Despite that, I had a surge of courage and very slowly tried to go around the other way. I bumped onto a nest with four eggs in it, and as an ecologist I felt ashamed. We were threatening an animal's nest, so we decided to leave the bird alone and abseil down. Then, only those who abseiled down a chimney before will understand what we had to go through, just to leave the *urubus* in peace.

Our next climb was to be on the North Face of Pão-de-Açúcar, where my favourite climbs are: classic long routes up to 320m long, some quite hard such as the *Barriga do Pássaro* (29) and *Waldemar Guimarães* (24 A0/25). The latter is an awesome route with chimneys, laybacks, edging on small holds, crack climbing and overhanging moves. For the courageous there is the no-turning-back *Contra-Pino* (22 A3) with aid climbing on skyhooks and small pitons, that takes 2 days to be completed. The other classic route is the *Ibis* (22 A1), a beautiful 400m climb with two aid-climbing pitches on old 1/4 inch bolts along a massive overhanging face. I did this route once and I still remember it as the day I thought I was a dead man.

Taylor supposedly knew the route and we cruised taking turns through the first seven pitches, including the aid sequences. After that I sat inside a good sized hole in the rock and Taylor went ahead. After more than an hour waiting for him to finish the pitch, I started to feel uneasy about it all. It was getting late and I knew it would be a nightmare to abseil down. The problem I soon found out was a steep 21/22 sequence on crumbly rock with bolts far apart. The supposedly easy next pitch was my lead. After a tricky grade 19 move, I clipped a 1/4 inch bolt and kept climbing. I couldn't see any bolts so I followed the most obvious path, a trail of small crystals diagonally to the right. Once that ended, I realized I was stuck. I looked down at the crappy old bolt about 15–20 metres below me, and started to panic, as I couldn't even see the next bolt ahead of me.

For the first time I felt real fear. My whole body was shaking, my muscles were completely tensed up and sweat was pouring from every pore. Falling would mean bouncing down the rock face for about 35 metres until the rope stretched. The bolt holding my fall, I would then spin and bounce sideways until I reached

the same line as the bolt. I was desperate, I knew I would probably die or at least suffer horrific injuries. I uttered things like: *Man I am gonna die! I'm really f***ed!* Taylor tried to calm me down (which was useless), but then, miraculously, I saw it! The damn bolt! There it was, about 7 or 8 more metres above. If I had to die, it would be better to die trying. It was a sequence of friction moves on dirty rock and the cracking noise of the top layer peeling off under my shoes sounded like death itself calling me. I managed to scramble up the face and get closer and closer to the bolt. I was fighting for my life and when I got close enough to it, I jumped and grabbed it with both hands (a good-sized P bolt). I was so overwhelmed that tears streamed down my face. I was taken up by a strange feeling of anger and relief and for a minute I was shouting every single swear word I knew. I took a good rest, before I could go on. In the remaining pitches I felt like I'd been granted another chance to live. That incident changed me, and I became much more cautious. I realized that I wanted climbing to be my life, not my death.

Back to the present, we decided that it was too hot (around 35° C) to attempt one of the North Face routes where the sun shines relentlessly. Instead we went to the West Face, to the most climbed route in Brazil: *Via dos Italianos* (19/20), a steep and well protected three pitch climb, consisting basically of edging on very small holds. I wanted to lead it and see how my technique was after almost 6 years living in New Zealand. The lead was fine, apart from the occasional feeling of insecurity for having to rely so much on my feet. To reach the top we did a 60 metre traverse to join the last 4 pitches of *Secundo Costa Neto*. It's an awesome sequence of a steep grade 17 with spaced protection. In those pitches there are two big plateaus, excellent to stop for a snack and a drink, and most important of all, to enjoy the amazing view. I felt pure joy being back at my favourite place in the world.

Reaching the top of Pão-de-Açúcar for a rock climber is like going to a 5-star hotel. It's the top station of the cable car, with restaurant, bar, toilets and shops. You can also boost your ego, as everyone thinks you've performed an amazing feat. In the end, you don't even have to abseil

On the subject of grading...

"I guess I should point out that the grades included here are not necessarily true (though I used tables from known books to translate them). Not only are graduation systems subjective to a certain extent, but also the type of rock and climbing styles peculiar to the climber and the place make a big difference."

Nathan Campbell, one of the top climbers in Otago, has recently been to Rio and was able to do some of the short climbs around Urca. It is interesting that while he cruised on the overhanging sport climbs that the locals tend to have trouble with, he had to work a bit on a route with small holds that he judged to be a 24/25, which in fact is graded as a 22." José G. Derraik.

down, just take a free ride on the cable car to the top of Morro da Urca. From there it's a 15 minute track down to the carpark. Heaven!

In the same week we went back again to the West Face. Our target this time was *Pássaros de Fogo* (23/24). It is a five pitch climb, not so well protected, that I was keen to try again. Last time I went with Fábio Cox, and he was attacked by *marimbondos* in the first pitch. As he got a few stings, I had to go up and retrieve the bloody quickdraws (expensive stuff). After a few jumps, many swear words and moments of pure adrenaline, I managed to reach the quickdraw closest to the nests, unclip it and jump again, so I could abseil from the bolt below. Despite the shaken spirit, I was unharmed. One good thing about *marimbondos* is that, unlike bees, they only protect the nest and do not chase the intruder. This time with Luiz Alexandre I had no luck again. There was a stream of rain water passing through the crux and we had to change our plans.

We decided to climb *Cão Danado* (25), a route established by Luiz. I'd heard about the distant protection so I suggested that he should go up. I am glad I did it, as the route is a constant 22 on very small holds with long runouts between every bolt. His lead was great, especially since he had gained 15 kilos since I last saw him, and before my arrival he had climbed only 5 times in the previous 12 months. It was a clean lead apart from the crux, graded 25, where he had to use the bolts to keep going. I stretched my body to the limit, but after more than a dozen tries, the sharp rock had removed the skin on my fingertips. I just gave up and shamefully grabbed the quickdraw.

Luiz then gained confidence and decided to go for the top half of *Cisco Kid* (24/25). This route is what I call suicidal. In the easier sections (16/17) the bolts can be as much as 20 metres apart. The first sequence was the hardest: powerful moves on very steep rock with small holds, probably a 25, which took me a few falls before I could do it. The rest of the climb includes some very tricky friction moves on a diagonal, and the long distance between the bolts mean that even on top rope a fall would mean injury. The risk didn't bother Luiz (as usual), and I was more worried watching him leading than he was doing it. Three pitches later

we were at the top of Pão-de-Açúcar again to enjoy the view.

The following weekend we decided to climb somewhere else: Corcovado, the 710m mountain world famous for having a 35m statue of Jesus on its top. It is an awesome cliff, with the longest and the most labour intensive climbs in the city. It has 3 main routes, all with little repetition, such as *Tragados pelo Tempo* (24 A3+) whose 14 pitches have only been climbed in two days, which has a difficult and dangerous aid sequence on skyhooks. The other two are Atalho do Diabo (28) with 9 pitches and *Oitavo Passageiro* (25/26 A2) with 12 pitches (the latter also being done in 2 days).

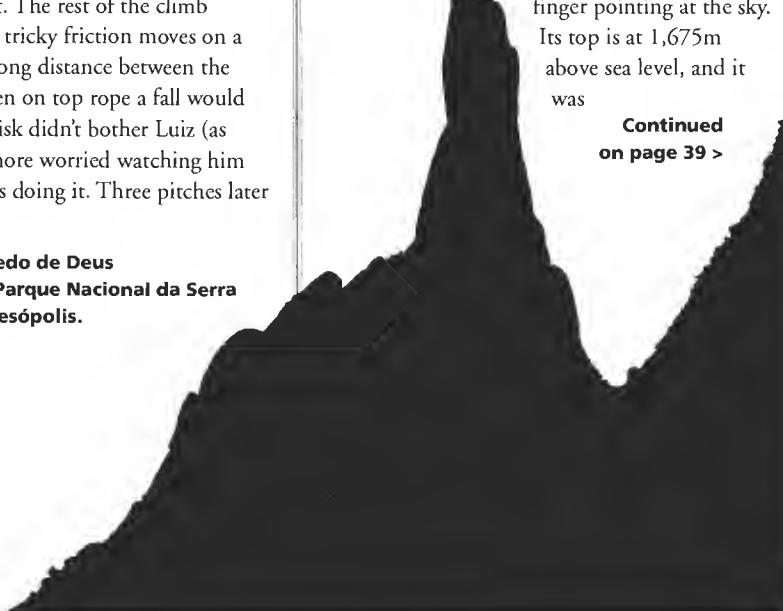
Luiz and I weren't feeling confident enough to attempt some of those routes at that time. We decided just to have a relaxing time on the 4 pitch *K2* (19). It covers only the top third of the mountain so it can be done in a couple of hours. For some reason, while I was leading it I thought the protection was incredibly far apart. I discovered later that exactly 12 bolts had been taken off the route. It seems that someone had placed new bolts that weren't originally there, and while I was away the 'conquerors' went back and knocked all of them down. Reaching the top was great, especially at night with the imposing and illuminated statue staring at us. My family was waiting for us, and we all enjoyed the magnificent nocturnal view of Rio de Janeiro that I hadn't seen in years.

Rio was now getting too hot. We had two days in a row of 37°C, so Nicola thought it would be a good idea to do her slave mother work somewhere cooler. We headed to Teresópolis, a small city 1 1/2 hours from Rio, where my auntie has an apartment. Luiz met us there, as we were planning to climb *Dedo de Deus* (literally 'God's finger'). It is a majestic rock formation located at the entrance of the city, causing amazement and delight in everyone. The name is self explanatory as it looks like a hand with the indicator finger pointing at the sky.

Its top is at 1,675m above sea level, and it was

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**The fantastic Dedo de Deus
(God's finger). Parque Nacional da Serra
dos Órgãos, Teresópolis.**



HIMALAYAS 2001/2002

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Shishapangma: April–May

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conquered in 1912 by some locals, none of them climbers: a hunter, three firemen and a blacksmith (who made the 'bolts' for the attempt). As they had never climbed before their 'climbing techniques' included carrying a tree trunk for most of the way to help with the ascent, and using human pyramids to overcome climbing obstacles! Needless to say such practices are no longer used...

Despite the torrential rain that fell the previous night Luiz and I went for it. The weather seemed to be improving, but we ended up being very wrong. We went up via the original

longest friction route in Brazil has been recently established: *Infinita Highway* which is 18 pitches long (approximately 720 metres), mostly grade 21 with the crux grade 24. Hidden deep into the forest there is also *Agulha do Diabo* (Devil's Needle). I climbed it once with Roberto Groba and it took us over 4 hours each way, to and from the mountain, plus 4 hours to climb it and abseil down. The track is extremely tiring including a bamboo forest, which is literally hell to walk through. It is narrow, prickly, your backpack is always getting jammed and you often have to duck and crawl beneath the

my mother's house, I could enjoy some easy climbs in the afternoons, which were always great fun in those beautiful surroundings. I also tried some nasty overhanging routes at *Morro de São João* that overlooks Copacabana Beach. We attempted a route called *Andrômeda* (probably 25/26), where half a pitch was enough to turn my forearms into bricks.

The time to return to New Zealand was approaching fast and I had only two more climbing days. One place I had to go to was *Pedra da Gávea* (860 m). The upper part of this mountain stands out for having

rived, she was already dead. Tragedies apart, a stopover for lunch in the 'eye' is a must, and from there we could watch dozens of paragliders and hang gliders floating very close to us. The view of São Conrado and Barra da Tijuca Beaches is just beautiful. However, what could not be ignored is the view of *Rocinha*, which is probably the biggest slum in the world. A sad result of Brazil's history, and appalling social and political situation.

A few days later I went back to Pão-de-Açúcar to once more enjoy *Via dos Italianos*. At the top I just sat silently, looking around. I was trying to take in as much as I could of